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Postcolonial Masculinities

by Derek Stanovsky

Postcolonial theory, emerging in recent years out of debates within literary theory and anti-colonial literature and discourse theory, has come to play an increasingly important role in an ever-expanding range of intellectual pursuits, including discussions of gender and of masculinity. Postcolonial theory itself refers to a heterogeneous set of theories and discursive practices aimed at theorizing and explicating the texts, cultures, and politics arising out of Third World contexts after their hard won independence from colonial rule. These postcolonial theories are often very closely associated and allied with the “posts” of postmodernism and poststructuralism as well. Sometimes the hyphenated term “post-colonial” is used to designate and specify the historical moment of decolonization and to separate it from the more expansive use of postcolonial which also tends to encompass these additional theoretical attachments, commitments, and tendencies (Ashcroft *et al* 1995). The discussion below will focus on the uses of the broadest notion of postcolonial theory in helping to understand and theorize the enormous variety of currently existing masculinities, both heterosexual and homosexual, through examinations of masculinities not just as they are produced and experienced in First World contexts, but also by looking transnationally and considering masculinities as they are produced and experienced in various Third World contexts as well as in the hybrid masculinities created through the cultural fusions of global diasporas.

Some of the earliest and most influential writings in what would later transform itself into postcolonial theory come from the works of Fanon. Drawing on his upbringing in Martinique, his education in France, and his experiences in Algeria, Fanon’s works are both results of colonialism and anti-colonial struggles as well as a critique of those histories. His writings are equally important for their keen insights into the production of gender and, in particular, to the distortions of masculinities produced in both those oppressed by colonization as well as in the masculinities experienced by the colonizers themselves. In his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon writes: “At whatever level we study it... decolonization is quite simply the replacing of a certain ‘species’ of men by another ‘species’ of men” (1961: 35). These changed men are brought about by and through the violent crucible of decolonization itself. Both the circumstances of colonization, as well as the overthrow of that colonization, impact the production of

consciousness. The gendered nature of consciousness is something always highlighted in Fanon's psychoanalytically framed arguments, as is the reciprocal influence the colonized and the colonizer exercise on each other in the formation of their respective gendered identities. "The need for this change exists in its crude state, impetuous and compelling, in the consciousness and in the lives of the men and women who are colonized. But the possibility of this change is equally experienced in the form of a terrifying future in the consciousness of another 'species' of men and women: the colonizers" (1961: 35-36). In his earlier book *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon explores the psychopathology of colonialism and racism as they manifest in both the colonized and the colonizer. In particular, he shows how this pathology expresses itself in sexualized identifications and fantasies of rape and aggression that become internalized by the colonized native (1952).

The principle inspiration for postcolonial theory, however, lies in the work of Palestinian-American literary critic, Said. In his extraordinarily influential book, *Orientalism*, Said employs a Foucauldian notion of discourse as a means not simply of representing, but also of controlling and disciplining the "other" that lies outside of the West. At the same time, this discourse helps to constitute and create the West by way of the boundaries and contrasts supplied by Orientalist discourse. The issue for Said is not the accuracy, or lack thereof, of these Western representations of the Orient, but, rather, the function of these representations in the West in helping produce and sustain imperialism and colonialism, and in the reiteration and recirculation of these representations in the East itself. This politics of representation lies at the heart of Said's project. Glossing Marx's line in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, that since "they cannot represent themselves, they must be represented," Said holds that the Orient becomes not a representing subject in its own right, but a subject represented by the West (1978: 21). Representation thus becomes an arena both for the dissemination of colonial control as well as for indigenous resistance to these Western discourses and representations.

Bhabha's work further elaborates on these issues raised by both Fanon and Said and explores the ways in which strategies such as mimicry and hybridity can often function as moments of resistance for subaltern subjects inhabiting the peripheries of Western culture and Western discourse (1994). Spivak's writings have also been central to the development of postcolonial theory. Her insightful and influential article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" has provoked enormous amounts of critical attention. Arguing not only that the exclusion of subaltern speech and representation happens within Western discourse, Spivak also asserts the impossibility of any such subaltern speech occurring and being heard within the confines and constraints imposed, created and maintained by Western discourse (1988).

These questions of representation are central to the study of postcolonial masculinities. First World discourses about Third World masculinities often produce and maintain representations that serve to create, perpetuate, and reinforce First World norms of masculinity and heterosexuality by way of the boundaries and contrasts provided by these "other" Third World masculinities and sexualities. For instance, Western

representations of native men as dangerously hypersexual beasts who pose an immanent threat to the safety, security, and virtue of white women have been used as mechanisms to help mobilize and justify the use of force against both native populations in the Third World as well as immigrant populations in the West. At the same time, these representations of native men also work to create and bolster violently repressive martial masculinities in the First World. Perceived threats to native women from these same presumptively predatory native men can also serve as justifications for colonial and neocolonial violence. Practices shocking to Western sensibilities, such as polygyny, widow sacrifice, burqas, or infibulation, can function as pretexts for First World intercessions. Spivak describes these as instances of "White men saving brown women from brown men" (1988: 297). These myths of postcolonial masculinities can be construed as yet another form of subaltern consciousness that does not speak and represent itself and so becomes represented through Western eyes and through Western discourse for Western purposes. Postcolonial masculinities thus run a similar risk of being essentialized and appropriated as the constitutive periphery of a central First World masculinity in much the way that Mohanty argues that "Third World Difference" has served as an imaginary backdrop for First World feminism (1991: 54). This essentializing and homogenizing of postcolonial masculinity serves to obscure the actual diversity and plurality of lived postcolonial masculinities around the globe.

Postcolonial theories of masculinity can also find connections and affinities with queer theory. For instance, Butler writes: "It seems crucial to resist the model of power that would set up racism and homophobia and misogyny as parallel or analogical relations" (1993: 18). That is, it is an illegitimate shortcut to construe the constructions of race and of masculinity as being the results of separate and disconnected systems of power, and it is also illegitimate to see them as necessarily following the same trajectories. Instead, it is the interlocking and mutual articulation of race by sex and sex by race that works to create and produce the subject of postcolonial masculinity. Using Butler, postcolonial masculinities, not unlike queer identities, may be construed as being produced and regulated by the performative citation and repetition of pre-existing cultural scripts that surround and enable the categories of race, sex, and compulsory heterosexuality (1993). This starting point also provides possibilities for resistance to these First World norms. Butler writes: "That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled" (1993: 2). For Butler, the dissonances and incongruities surrounding the cultural circulation and reception of representations of postcolonial masculinities may provide one method of contesting and resisting the always tentative hold exercised by the dominant culture on the meaning of these discourses.

Other approaches to postcolonial masculinities can be found in works ranging from those of R.W. Connell and other sociologists who originally focused on ethnographic case studies to recent works in the literature on gender and development and postdevelopment (Connell 2005, Pease and Pringle 2001, Morrell and Swart 2005, Lind and Share 2003). These works overlap and explore in new ways many of the same terrains that have been traversed by postcolonial theory. These alternative explorations of the sociological and economic dimensions of transnational masculinities cut across

some of the same boundaries of nationality and ethnicity breached by postcolonial theory. They provide new concrete accounts of the varieties of these lived postcolonial masculinities. However, the meta-theoretical issues that occupy much of postcolonial theory concerning the always-vexed relationship of any First World discourse to the Third World experiences it seeks to represent, continues to sound a salient, useful, and perhaps inescapable cautionary note for all such inquiries.

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